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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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It may just be possible that, this year, we may have an actual seasonal Spring. The weather has been terrific. A little hot, but not too unbearable. The past few years have been nothing but rain after rain, so we’re long overdue. The grass is already green and plush, the spring blooms are out and other annuals have started to grow. I have to do some transplanting soon before these plants get too large! And then on to getting the gardens ready for planting - my major annual Spring project.

A lot of strange news these past few weeks. In this week’s issue, there’s an article about a California web site seeking to outsource a reporter to report on the city government and political scene of Pasadena! Outsource from some place half way around the world to report on local government and other political scenes. How stupid is that? Do I really need to spell it out?

And how about this online petition to "free Paris Hilton"?? Do people truly understand real life or are they so enamored with Hollywood that they’ll do almost anything to "protect" their "heroes" no matter how idiotic they are? Paris Hilton, the perfect example of the spoiled little rich kid that doesn’t know how to act. Breaks her probation for a DUI charge by driving. The judge sentences her to 45 days in jail, and everyone (the Paris Hilton groupies) is outraged This woman is a spoiled brat who really needs a dose of reality. Take away her cell phone, make-up, and people tending to her every need - see how it feels for a change. Let’s see if her money can get her out of this mess. Isn’t today’s technology great? Start a web site in an attempt to generate sympathy for someone who deserves little. Fortunately, there are also people who have started a web site supporting the sentence. I think the campaign should be "free us of the likes of Paris Hilton and other Hollywood primadonnas, and their wannabe groupies!

Well, enough ranting for one week! The days are getting longer and the weather has been nice. What more could we ask?!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone, and we're heading head-long toward summer. We've had a few very nice days here in the Northeast, and it's only whetted my appetite for more. I mean, who could turn their nose up at warm, sunny, breezy days and nights warm enough to leave the windows open?

Oh yeah, that's right, allergy sufferers. I'd almost forgotten about my allergy to grass. With the warm, moist nights, the grass grows like crazy, and it's affecting me more this year than it has in years past.

Oh well. Time to pop an antihistamine, I guess.

On another front, I linked up with an old friend from high school for pizza last night. I haven't seen him in 29 years... since we graduated. I met up with another friend while grocery shopping a couple of weeks ago, and she introduced me to this guy's wife, who happened to work at the store.

Several weeks later, we'd traded emails and set up a meeting time and place to get together over a pizza. How could any reunion go wrong over PIZZA?

My wife and I got to the pizza parlor and I chuckled at the fact that I hadn't seen Jeff in so long that I was going to have to look for his WIFE instead of for him. And that's the way it worked out, too. I'd seen her only 2 weeks before, but hadn't seen him in almost three decades! The tall, skinny, wild-haired guy from high school now had a shiny dome and a spare tire around his middle to match my own. I guess that means that life is good, huh? They brought their two kids (ages 10 and 12), and everyone had a good time. It turns out that he's a 'computer guy' too, and we talked while we greedily consumed the hapless pizza that was set out before us.

It's nice, this being able to catch up on old times in a comfortable setting. It makes me yearn for the days when there were five or six (or more) Atari shows a year, and all you had to do to mingle with old acquaintances was to show up and walk around the place.

I remember the WAACE, Blue Ridge and Connecticut shows I've gone to quite fondly. The days of mingling with vendors and developers were something that it's hard to explain to someone who hasn't done it. I can remember sitting at Gribnif's booth, chatting about this and that with Dan and Rick and... oh, what was her name... Trish?... Well, anyway, I can remember sitting around their booth (table, actually) and chatting about miscellaneous things. Dave Small's table was always too swamped to just sit there and chat, Jim Allen was always good for a few minutes of 'wow' demonstrations, as were the CodeHeads and the guys from DC Software.

I often wonder whatever happened to some of them, but I do run across a few here and there while cruising around online. And when that happens, it's usually like old times once again. That's one thing that the PC world... and even the Mac world... always kind of lacked. Everything was either so buttoned-down or intent on showing off the chips on their shoulders that there's seldom time, even today, for the camaraderie

that the Atari world always had.

OH! That reminds me; I don't normally like to provide URLs for things like this, but if you are as tired of those Mac vs. PC commercials as I am, check out Novell's version. Since Novell bought out a particular Linux distribution, they've been trying to increase its visibility, and therefore the visibility of Linux in general. For an interesting turn to the "Hello, I'm a PC... And I'm a Mac" commercials, go here: http://www.novell.com/video/ and scroll down to "PC Mac Linux" 1, 2 and 3.

They're not the quality of the famous "1984" Mac commercial, but they're cute and they fill a few minutes. The videos are also available on YouTube. Just search for Novell, PC, Linux and Mac.

Well, I'm about talked-out for now. So let's take a look at what's been happening on the UseNet, okay?

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

In a conversation continued from a couple of weeks ago about using a 50-to-68-pin converter for SCSI drives, Daniel Mandic asks:

"... Does it work otherwise? 50pin-to-68pin adapter (8bit SCSI drives to Wide host-controller).

How fast would it be (MB/sec), let's say with a 4.3GB UW HD and the adapter for 50pin SCSI, with HDDriver and the TT?

By the way, will any other SCSI devices work properly, with the 68-50pin Harddrive connected to the TT SCSI-Bus? So far I understand, it should just act like a real 50pin 8bit SCSI HDdrive. Can it even support different SCSI settings, like std.SCSI and Fast-SCSI 10MB/sec etc. (of course in an other, more capable controller, e.g. NCR53C810 etc.)?

In short, is it really compatible (wide drives with adapter to TT) as it were an 8bit SCSI-drive (older newer, anyhow, except the SCSI version of the Fireball QUANTUM ;)), with downward compatibility to older 8bit
SCSI host-controller, not able of Fast-SCSI, SCSI-II and such?"

Uwe Seimet tells Daniel:

"The maximum with the TT is about 1.8 or 1.9 MB/s with any drive not older than about 10 years.

Any device should work, and the TT (and Falcon as well) can make use of any available SCSI-2/3 command."

On the subject of the EtherNAT ethernet card, someone mentions:

"... On the other hand i have paid for a ethernac card at least a year ago. I have never heard a thing since then. i may have to write it off."

Rob Mahlert asks him:

"Have you watched the postings on http://nature.atari.org ?

Latest as of April 24th is another 18 are finished and they would like to send out 20, I hope this month.
I also paid well over a year ago.. September 24th 2005 to be exact.
But, I understand they had issues with the boards and they needed to be fixed which is taking time.

But they are trying to give monthly updates on the website, so check it out. Once and a while We will also post the latest on Atari-users.net"

Ronald Hall takes a jovial tone and tells Rob:

"Ha, beat ya Rob - I paid mine Sep 19th, 2005..."

Guallaume Tello asks for help with large partitions:

"I'd like to install a 4Gb hard drive on my TT but partitions larger than 512Mb are refused, and 8 partitions is too much.

I've heard about BigDOS.

How to install it? Should I keep one boot partition with 512Mb and share the 3.5Gb for the others?

Is BigDOS compatible with Freemint+MultiTOS, FreeMint+MyAES, Magic6.02?

My usual system is the TOS3.06, but I sometimes use the others for testing purposes. Any help is welcome."

'MiKRO' tells Guillaume:

"As far as I know, it's the limitation of TOS 3.x ... TOS 4.x has this limit at 1 GB per partition.

If you use FreeMiNT, you don't need to install anything -- your >=512 MB partition will be visible without any problem. The same for MagiC. However, it wont be visible from TOS, of course."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. I know it's short, but there hasn't been a lot of activity on the NewsGroup for the past couple of weeks.

Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - 'The Red Star' - Big Bang for the Buck!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" NYT Author Scripts Blockbuster Game!
D'oh, Simpsons In A Video Game!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

'The Red Star' Provides Lots of Bang for Your Buck

Rarely can you discover new console releases on store shelves sporting a $20 price tag, let alone one that justifies your bargain purchase.

Enter XS Games' The Red Star, a simple yet gratifying action romp for any frugal gamer.

The plot is set in an alternate Russia, known as the United Republics of the Red Star. Three soldiers unite to liberate the U.R.R.S. from the evil grip of Troika, the Harvester of Souls. The story is slightly vague, limited only to mission debriefings before each level.

The Red Star is a mix of scrolling shooter and brawler, with a solid balance in both melee and long-range combat. You start by choosing between one of two characters: Makita, a speedy soldier who works best up close; and Kyuzo, a plodding bruiser able to wipe out hordes of enemies with one stroke of his sword. Unfortunately, once you pick, you're stuck with that character throughout.

Overall, The Red Star is classic and simple. Controls consist of your melee and gun attacks plus a shield and special power-up attack. Graphics are decent, but lacking in character details.

The wide variety of foes keeps battles surprisingly engaging when you consider the game's relatively basic structure. Each requires different strategies based on their attacks and defensive capabilities. Some are impervious to long-range strikes, while others can dodge up-close flurries easily.

The Red Star boasts some formidable levels and tough opponents, but you must slog through some formulaic early stages to get to the quality parts. The first few levels focus mostly on simple ground forces and about 2-3 bosses. These stages serve better to hone your skills since they're incredibly easy to conquer.

The latter levels are where The Red Star shines. Standard foes and bosses are tougher. Instead of sticking to one angle per level, stages vary between top-down scrolling and side-to-side throughout. Obstacles litter the landscape, adding to the difficulty.

While the impact is hardly felt early on, the lack of mid-level checkpoints is highly frustrating. Die at the end of a level and you're thrust back to the very beginning. Some levels are short, but having to repeat stages upon your demise grows annoying over time. There are also periods where The Red Star feels repetitive with the limited number of attacks and weaponry available.

Most of The Red Star's foibles are easy to forgive when you consider you've spent a third the cost of most new console releases. Gamers playing on a budget should find high levels of intensity and challenge in this low-cost adventure.

D'oh! Simpsons Inside a Video Game!

You wake up and realize that you are in a video game. What now? If you're named Homer, Marge, Bart, or Lisa, you obviously want to discover and use what powers you might have.

Announced yesterday by Electronic Arts (EA) and scheduled for release later this year, The Simpsons Game will be available for all the major platforms, including the PlayStation 3, PlayStation 2, PlayStation Portable, Xbox 360, Nintendo Wii, and Nintendo DS.

The voice actors who speak the parts on the hit TV series will reprise those roles in the game, which has been created with Gracie Films, Twentieth Century Fox Television, and Twentieth Century Fox Licensing and Merchandising.

Players must help the four characters use their powers as they venture through episodes in Springfield and beyond, battling villains, encountering references to the TV series, and engaging in parodies of various popular games, from Pong onwards. Simpsons creator Matt Groening has described the gameplay as "hard."

Among other powers, Homer can blow up into a ball like a human pufferfish and knock things over. Characteristically, that power results from ingesting large quantities of food. His big-ball form can consist of other substances than Homer-flesh, such as, when appropriate, lava.

Bart can don his Bartman costume and, with supporting props such as a zip-line, do things like moving from rooftop to rooftop. Characteristically, he can get to places that other characters cannot. And Marge can nag people into doing what she wants. No word yet on Lisa's powers.

The game is broken into episodes and every episode is designed to have two family members at all times, for switching back and forth between their points of view.

Advance word is that the game will have about 200 characters, including about 100 from the series. There are "hundreds and hundreds" of collectibles, according to the game's producers. For the Wii version, where players can move the motion-sensing controller as part of the gameplay, there will reportedly be a speed-eating contest - with the controller replacing a fast-moving fork.

The game is been developed by EA’s Redwood Shores Studio. "The EA group," said Simpsons Executive Producer James L. Brooks in a statement, "was so enormously talented and beyond belief energetic that I am thinking of suing for second-hand exhaustion."

This is not the first Simpsons game, but Executive Producer Scott Amos said the goal was "to create the most original game ever, which is a lofty goal and only possible given the close collaboration with The Simpsons creative team. We’re also especially proud of the game’s warm visual feel, which captures - for the first time ever in a game - the look of the TV show."

New York Times Best-Selling Author Scripts Blockbuster Video Game

Atari, Inc. Thursday announced that New York Times best-selling author Lorenzo Carcaterra has teamed up with the company as script writer on Alone in the Dark. Poised to redefine action gaming, Alone in the Dark will deliver blockbuster-action on a cataclysmic scale set in New York City’s iconic Central Park. Alone in the Dark is being developed by Eden Games for Xbox 360 video game and entertainment system from Microsoft, PlayStation3 computer entertainment system and Windows platform.

With more than twenty years of writing experience, Carcaterra lends his creative pen to provide the most authentic NYC experience yet in a video game. Born and raised in New York’s Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood, Carcaterra has covered the city in both fact and fiction, beginning as a reporter for the NY Daily News in 1976, becoming a successful television consultant and writer for shows including Law and Order and achieving success as the best selling author of such books as Apaches, Gangster and Sleepers, the latter of which became the hit film starring Robert De Niro and Brad Pitt.

"Carcaterra delivers riveting stories filled with graphic narrative that have earned him international acclaim," said David Nadal, Studio Head, Eden Games. "Gripping, compelling storylines are the basis of what differentiates a good game from a blockbuster. With Alone in the Dark, Carcaterra has crafted a meticulously engaging storyline that will grab the player from the start and send them on a journey through Central Park they will never forget."

"Alone in the Dark was a challenge which allowed me to bring a realistic feel to an apocalyptic situation facing New York City and really dig into the Central Park conspiracy idea," said Lorenzo Carcaterra. "It also allowed me to write for hard-edged characters, some good, some bad, all forced to confront a force whose power they could never imagine. The story never stalls, always moves in overdrive and the characters zoom right along at warp speed, stopping long enough along the way to say a few lines that keep driving the plot forward. The end result is, I hope, a roller-coaster of a thrill ride that should be tons of fun to play."

Taking inspiration from today’s globally popular TV action dramas, Alone in the Dark delivers a new level of gripping narrative intensity, presented as a complete season format of episodes each containing action, plot twists and cliff-hangers. With a script written by best-selling author Carcaterra, players take the role of Edward Carnby as over the course of one apocalyptic night he must uncover the earth-shattering secret behind Central Park.

With a dramatic, graphic and fast-paced storyline, unprecedented levels of real-world interaction and physics, advanced artificial intelligence, stunning visuals and uniquely immersive interface, all set in a meticulously detailed, wide-open environment, Alone in the Dark is set to break gaming cliches, fulfill the next gen-promise, and deliver a new kind of entertainment experience.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

New Trojan Mimics Windows Reactivation

A new Trojan Horse is making the rounds, impersonating Windows reactivation and antipiracy messages with the goal of duping users into divulging their credit card information.

According to computer security firm Symantec, the Trojan, ubbed Trojan.Kardphisher, creates a Windows look-alike screen, headlined "Microsoft piracy control," and indicates that the copy of Windows was activated by another user and needs to be reactivated.

"To help reduce software piracy, please reactivate your copy of Windows now," it instructs. "You must activate Windows before you can continue to use it." The user is given two choices: reactivating Windows over the Internet immediately or doing it later. No other applications can be run, and Task Manager cannot be launched to force-quit the Trojan.

If reactivation is deferred, the system is shut down. And if users proceed with the fake reactivation, a second screen appears, requesting private information that includes location, contact information, a credit card number, the card's expiration date and three-digit security number, and even an ATM PIN.

The Trojan informs the user that the credit card information will not be charged. But, once entered, the information is sent to the fraud's perpetrators to use as they wish. The initial screen even references an actual Microsoft antipiracy site: microsoft.com/piracy.

Symantec said that the Trojan affects Windows XP, Windows 2000, Windows Server 2003, and even earlier versions of Windows, including 95, 98, and NT.

Sometimes, Windows does indeed require reactivation, such as after substantial hardware upgrades, but Microsoft does not ask for financial information. The Trojan's request for reactivation and its close resemblance to actual Windows screens make it a potentially effective attack against some users, Symantec said.

While Symantec has posted detailed instructions on how to remove the

Trojan, some observers have noted that fake information can be entered to "activate" an infected Windows machine when prompted, so that the Trojan could then be removed.

"This Trojan teaches us all a good lesson - Trust No One," wrote Symantec's Takashi Katsuki on the company's blog. "Sometimes the creators of Trojans attempt to impersonate Microsoft, a bank, or even a government organization. Whatever the warning or message says, we must make very sure it is genuine before giving up any personal details, financial or otherwise."

It is far better to doubt a genuine request until proper verification is provided, Katsuki went on to say, than it is to blindly place your trust in a message simply because it appears to have come from a trusted source.

"Sad though it may be," Katsuki wrote, "the days of leaving your front door unlocked are over. In these times, we not only need a lock on the door, we need a security guard watching the front door, the back door, and everywhere in between."

Silly Worm Targets USB Memory Sticks

According to researchers at security firm Sophos, a new family of worms is targeting removable storage devices, including USB memory sticks and floppy disks. The worms, formally named W32/SillyFD-AA, create a hidden file to ensure a copy of the worm is run the next time the media is connected to a Windows PC. It also changes the title of Internet Explorer windows to append the phrase "Hacked by 1BYTE."

Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant for Sophos, warned computer users to tread carefully when attaching an unknown device to a PC. "With USB keys becoming so cheap, they are increasingly being given away at trade shows and in direct mailshots," he said. "Marketing people are prepared to use them as 'throwaways' with the aim of securing sales leads."

As the SillyFD-AA threat is demonstrating, careless use of the increasingly popular memory sticks and other removable media might offer more than harmless file transfers. With a significant rise in financially motivated malware, Cluley noted, the Silly worm could be an obvious backdoor into a company for criminals bent on targeting a specific business with their malicious code.

Targeted attacks aside, the Silly worm is indicative of another security trend. As more and more businesses implement strong defenses to protect against e-mail-borne malware, hackers are increasingly looking for less well-defended routes.

"In this example, changing the title of the Internet Explorer browser's windows should be a pretty clear sign to most people that something strange is afoot," Cluley noted. "It also indicates that this particular variant of the worm has not been written with completely clandestine intentions." A savvier Internet criminal, he said, would not have made it so obvious that the PC has been infected.

The Silly worm might seem like a new tactic, but it's really an old trick rehashed for a new generation. Computer viruses first evolved by infecting files on floppy disks that were taken from one PC to another; the Silly

worm uses the same strategy.

Michael Sutton, a security evangelist at SPI Dynamics and former director of VeriSign iDefense Labs, said it’s amusing to see attackers revert to outdated techniques for worm propagation, but pointed out that it’s largely unnecessary considering that e-mail is still an effective method for infecting PCs.

"There are still more than enough vulnerable machines and gullible people to make an e-mail-based worm the fastest and most effective way to infect a broad range of hosts," Sutton argued. "Security has a long was to go before attackers will be forced to revert to the sneaker net to spread malicious code."

Sophos experts offered some common-sense advice: Any storage device that is attached to a computer should be checked for viruses and other malware before use. Also, users should disable the autorun facility of Windows so removable devices such as memory sticks and CD-ROMs do not automatically launch applications when they are inserted.

Sophos reiterated that floppy disks, CD-ROMs, USB keys, external hard drives, and other devices are all capable of carrying malicious code that could infect the computers of innocent users, and recommended that companies employ automatic antivirus updates, and defend their users with a multipronged solution to block viruses, spyware, hackers, and spam.

Symantec Releases May Spam Report

Symantec has released its May 2007 report on "The State of Spam."

The report includes news and data from the company’s ongoing monitoring of vast amounts of e-mail. Here are some of the highlights of the report:

The overall percentage of e-mail that is spam might be trickling down a bit over the long term, but was basically the same as last month at about 65 percent.

The percentage of e-mail that is image spam went down quite a bit, from 37 percet to 27 percent, but this number has a history of wild fluctuation.

A new form of spam disparages specific companies. Why?

Spammers are using image upload services to try to avoid detection.

A new type of 419 scam involves (this is a lie of course) soldiers in Iraq.

StopBadware.org Names Top Malware Hosting Services

StopBadware.org, an organization founded to combat malware (which it calls "badware"), has released a list of the top five hosting services in its "Badware Website Clearinghouse."

The trend, the group argues, is away from sites that knowingly distribute badware and towards hijacking Web sites and using them to host it unknowingly. Many phishing sites work this way as well.

Security on these hijacked sites is, at least in part, the responsibility of the hosting services that run them. The five hosting services with the most affected sites are:

1. iPowerWeb, Inc., (10,834)
2. Layered Technologies, (2,513)
3. ThePlanet.com Internet Services, Inc, (2,056)
4. Internap Network Services, (1,437)
5. CHINANET Guangdong province network, (786)

The site compromises occur largely as a result of weak passswords and exploits of known vulnerabilities in software.

Congress Considers Data-Protection Legislation

More than 20,000 University of Missouri employees this week. Over 100,000 Homeland Security employees last week. Over 45 million TJX customers last year. It’s increasingly not a question of who has had their personal and financial data compromised, but who hasn’t?

In response to the rapidly growing number of victims and the often-tragic stories of lives ruined by identity theft, Congress is considering several bills to enhance protection for personal data. This is a topic that Congress has examined several times in the past, but recent events have given a greater urgency to the issue.

The lead proposal right now is The Personal Data Privacy and Security Act of 2007 (S. 495), a bipartisan bill introduced on February 6, 2007, by Senators Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) and Arlen Specter (R-Penn.). The legislation was
approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee on May 3 and sent to the full Senate for its consideration.

"This is a bill that deals with the underlying problem of lax security and lack of accountability to help prevent data breaches from occurring in the first place and also addresses the need to provide Americans with better notice of breaches that may affect their personal information," Senator Leahy said in a press release following the committee vote. "Passing this comprehensive privacy legislation is a legislative priority."

The Leahy/Specter bill is designed to enhance personal data privacy in two ways. First, the bill will require companies that hold personal information on more than 10,000 Americans to establish and implement data privacy and security programs, and to evaluate the data security practices of third parties given access to the data.

The bill also would direct Federal departments and agencies to vet government contractors that handle data, to audit the practices of commercial data brokers hired by the government, and to conduct privacy-impact assessments on their use of commercial databases.

A key provision of the bill is a new requirement that companies and

governmental agencies promptly notify consumers, credit-reporting agencies, and law enforcement in the event of a breach of private data. Currently, there is no legal requirement as to when (or even whether) such notice should be provided.

Individuals who illegally access personal information would face tougher criminal penalties for doing so, and companies that fail to provide the required notice or fail to implement data-security measures would face increased civil penalties. If a company "intentionally and willfully" concealed a breach of private data, the individuals responsible could face criminal charges.

When Senator Leahy introduced the bill on the floor of the Senate, he noted that the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse has estimated that 100 million records containing sensitive personal information have been compromised since 2005.

"Today," Senator Leahy said, "Americans live in a world where their most sensitive personal information can be accessed and sold to the highest bidder with a few keystrokes on their computer. Our privacy laws greatly lag behind both the capabilities of our technology and the cunning of identity thieves. This legislation closes that gap."

Yahoo To End North American Auctions

Yahoo Inc. will close its online auction service for North America next month, signaling the Internet powerhouse’s intention to focus on more profitable endeavors as it tries to snap out of a financial malaise.

The Sunnyvale-based company’s auctions in the United States and Canada will end June 16, although some tools will remain accessible until Oct. 29. The closure won’t affect Yahoo’s auction services in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan.

Yahoo is retreating from North America’s auction market nearly nine years after launching the service.

The retrenchment coincides with Yahoo’s plans to phase out its original photo service this summer in favor of a more recent offering, called Flickr, that provides more sophisticated tools for sharing pictures.

The decisions to close the auction and photo services provide the latest indication that Yahoo is reassessing the value of its far-flung Web properties in an attempt to reverse a revenue slowdown that has disappointed investors.

"Yahoo is continuing to align our resources to focus on core strategic priorities and deliver a superior user experience, and as part of this effort, we are re-prioritizing some products," the company said in a statement provided Wednesday.

After stumbling through much of 2006, Yahoo opened the first three months of this year with an 11 percent decline in its profit. The slowdown helped spur speculation last week that Microsoft Corp. might try to buy Yahoo and forge a business partnership as both companies try to combat online search leader Google Inc.

Yahoo’s reshuffling mirrors some of the suggestions made last fall by one of the company’s own executives, Brad Garlinghouse, who had urged the management to pull the plug on some less popular or overlapping services in a widely distributed internal memo. Garlinghouse’s missive became known as the "Peanut Butter Manifesto" because it argued Yahoo had spread itself too thin.

Closing the North American auction service was a "no-brainer" because Yahoo had such an insignificant market share, said Bill Tancer, general manager of global research for Hitwise, which tracks Internet trends.

Yahoo attracted less than 0.2 percent of the U.S. traffic to auction sites during the week ended May 5 compared with nearly 85 percent for the longtime market leader eBay Inc., according to Hitwise.

"If you can’t compete in the space, it makes no sense to be there," Tancer said.

By closing its auction site, Yahoo also might score points with San Jose-based eBay, one of the company’s major advertising partners.

Yahoo’s closure of its original photo service is more risky because it actually is slightly more popular than Flickr. In the week ending May 5, the first-generation photo service attracted 6 percent of the U.S. traffic in its category compared with 4.8 percent for Flickr, Hitwise said.

But Flickr tends to attract more urban consumers who tend to spend more on technology - a potentially more lucrative demographic that Yahoo apparently hopes to build upon.

Yahoo is encouraging the users of its original photo service to embrace Flickr. Recognizing not everyone will want to make the leap, Yahoo is offering ways for users to transfer their photos to competing services, including Shutterfly, Photobucket, Kodak Gallery and Snapfish.

TSA Sued by Union Over Lost Hard Drive

Outraged by last week’s announcement by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) that it lost an external hard drive containing as a many as 100,000 archived employee records (including social security numbers, birth dates, payroll, and bank account information), the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) has filed a class action lawsuit against the agency.

The AFGE, which represents numerous employees in the Department of Homeland Security, alleges that the TSA violated both the Aviation and Transportation Security Act (ATSA) and the Privacy Act of 1974. "TSA’s reckless behavior is clearly in violation of the law," AFGE National President John Gage declared. "TSA must be held liable for this wanton disregard for employee privacy."

The AFGE is seeking several remedies: the creation of new security procedures to comply with the requirements of the Privacy Act and the ATSA; time off without penalty for any TSA employee who needs to deal with identity theft resulting from the equipment loss; and compensation for any financial damages suffered by TSA employees as a result of the TSA’s alleged violation of the Privacy Act.

Lew Maltby, the President of the National Workrights Institute in Princeton, N.J., predicted that it would be a challenging case for the AFGE. "This is the kind of case that you don't see very often," Maltby said. "The law in this area is not particularly good. If you want to enforce better employer care for private data, you need a law that imposes a duty on them to do so, and it's not clear that these laws do that."

Even before the lawsuit was filed, the TSA announced that it is offering its employees a free year of credit monitoring, up to $25,000 in free identity fraud insurance, and the services of identity restoration experts in the event that theft does occur.

When asked about the track record of employers in protecting employee information, Maltby gave a grim chuckle. "What care?" he asked. "Employers and other large organizations have an atrocious record regarding private record confidentiality. If the AFGE employees win this lawsuit, that would help, but strong privacy legislation would be better."

The loss of the TSA hard drive is particularly problematic because of the possibility that the employee information could be used to create false Homeland Security credentials. As AFGE President Gage put it, "The maintenance and safeguarding of personnel data is vital to the protection of security at our nation's airports. This is the Department of Homeland Security we are talking about. A DHS agency that cannot even shield its own employee data is not reassuring."

According to a statement issued by the TSA, the agency has been working with the Secret Service since last Friday to investigate the loss of the hard drive, and the Inspector General of the Homeland Security Department is closely monitoring the investigation, with measures in place to alert the TSA if someone attempts to use the hard drive. Those measures have not been specified.

With Yahoo Deal Off, What Next for Microsoft?

As of Tuesday, a Microsoft-Yahoo megamerger seems far less likely than it did late last week.

But the reason the companies would want to join forces - Google's continued dominance in online advertising revenue and in Web-based services in general - remains as strong as ever. And it raises questions about what Microsoft's next move will be to generate a healthy online advertising business and avoid losing even more ground to the flourishing search company.

There are many reasons why a Microsoft-Yahoo deal would have been a bad idea, and some in the industry are breathing a sigh of relief that they won't have to deal with the complexity it would have wrought.

Critics questioned how the two companies would navigate separate ad platforms and network infrastructures as well as how they would integrate their disparate corporate cultures. They also said the full union of the companies would take at least two years to complete, giving Google even more time to solidify its leading market position.

Wall Street analysts also noted it would be a bad idea for Microsoft to

undertake such an enormous merger when the company has traditionally made smaller, more strategic acquisitions. A research note by analyst Heather Bellini at UBS advised the company to tackle its online technology challenges on its own while acquiring more customers by buying startups and other small companies.

However, she also noted that there aren't a lot of valuable Internet assets on the market now that Google has snapped up Doubleclick, a deal that is expected to close by the end of the year.

So what's a software company that waited too long to capitalize on the new business model of the Internet to do now? Microsoft is in dire straits in the online advertising market, and the company has to change tactics before it becomes too late to even be a serious contender, let alone the revenue leader, as Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer has promised.

Leveraging its skyrocketing revenue and profits, Google has diversified its line of products and services, moving into areas outside of consumer online services, such as offline advertising, hosted software for businesses, and enterprise search. Within consumer online services, it has also expanded beyond Internet search, developing a broad menu of products in such areas as photo management, Web mail, video, and instant messaging.

Microsoft, on the other hand, has failed to promote its Windows Live branded services since it launched a major revamp and branding plan in November 2005. Moreover, the company has seen revenues in its Online Services Group rise only slightly since that time and has made new and improved services languish in beta testing only for select users before making them publicly available. This runs counter to the strategy of Google, which pushes out services to users in rapid-fire fashion even if they remain in beta for years. Microsoft also has had a hard time marketing its Office Live hosted service, which provides a Web presence, CRM, e-mail, and other hosted services to small businesses.

Some industry watchers said there still are ways other than merger or Microsoft and Yahoo - or Microsoft and another competitor - to team up against Google.

One financial analyst who asked not to be named suggested that Microsoft and Yahoo broaden an ad-revenue sharing deal they already have. It lets Microsoft use the Yahoo Search Marketing platform, formerly called Overture, in overseas markets to provide paid search listings to Microsoft's MSN and affiliates. Microsoft would not disclose the terms of the revenue-sharing deal, but essentially Microsoft pays Yahoo to push out ads to some of its sites and in turn earns advertising revenue. Eventually, markets currently served by Yahoo's search platform will be powered by Microsoft's adCenter platform, which is already handling Microsoft's paid search advertising in the U.S., U.K., France, Singapore, and China.

Andrew Brust, chief of new technology for consulting firm Twentysix New York, offered another plan for Microsoft, of which his company is a partner. He thinks it would be a good idea for Microsoft to cozy up to multimedia content providers like AOL and News Corp., which owns both the Fox media empire and the popular social networking site MySpace.com, to earn more advertising revenue. A deal with Myspace.com would be an especially smart move because it would give Microsoft "an 'it' presence it is far short of right now," he said.

One stumbling block to any online acquisition or partnership is Microsoft

itself, Brust said. "I'm still not convinced they really want this," he said. "Rather, I think that they think they have to have it, and so their approach is too reactive."

Michael Gartenberg, vice president and research director at Jupiter Research, suggested that rather than acquire or partner another company to gain ground on Google, Microsoft should turn inward and focus on execution of its own online strategy. The company has developed innovative online services behind the scenes but has been slow getting those out to users, he said.

"One of the challenges at Microsoft is how to get the technology out the door," Gartenberg said. "Look at how long the Hotmail upgrade (launched globally Monday) was in beta. Part of what Microsoft has to do is execute ... [and] deliver on things that it may already have in the back room."

Microsoft in January 2006 launched Windows Live Labs as a way to develop new online technologies and services quickly so it can push out offerings the way Google does. However, the group has delivered only a few services since its creation.

New Domain Names Could Come In Mid-2008

New Internet addresses for general use could start appearing in the summer of 2008 under a timeline the Internet's key oversight agency announced Thursday.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers invited public comment on procedures for creating new names, the first expansion for general use since 2000. Names added since then have been limited to specific regions or industries.

"This is all about choice," ICANN Chief Executive Paul Twomey said in a statement. "We want the diversity of the world's people, geography and business to be able to be represented in the domain name system."

Domain names are key for helping computers find Web sites and route e-mail. There are currently about 250 domain name suffixes, most of them for specific countries such as ".fr" for France. General-use names include ".com" and ".net."

In 2000, two years after its designation by the U.S. government as the authority for overseeing Internet naming policies, ICANN approved seven new names, but only ".info" and ".biz" were truly for general use.

ICANN solicited additional applications in 2004 and has approved six regional or industry-specific names, such as ".travel" and ".asia," while rejecting ".xxx" for the adult entertainment industry.

Some ICANN critics have complained that the agency has been slow to approve new names and that the procedures have sometimes been arbitrary. Businesses and trademark owners, meanwhile, worry that more names will lead to more cybersquatting, the practice of grabbing names before companies can in hopes of selling them at a premium.

ICANN did not specify how individuals and groups would be able to seek new names, but the group indicated that the procedures would be

streamlined to permit "a much wider variety of them to be added in a timely, predictable and efficient manner."

An ICANN committee, the Generic Names Supporting Organization, still is reviewing the procedures. Once it sends a recommendation to the ICANN board, procedures could be adopted by year's end and applications for new names could be accepted early next year.

Twomey said new names could be reviewed and added into the system in the June-August 2008 timeframe.

The new addresses are likely to be in English.

ICANN could wrap up the technical work on non-Latin scripts by year's end, but it still must resolve policy questions such as who should decide what countries get what suffixes and how to make sure a domain in one language isn't inadvertently offensive in another.

California Web Site Outsources Reporting

The job posting was a head-scratcher: "We seek a newspaper journalist based in India to report on the city government and political scene of Pasadena, California, USA."

A reporter half a world away covering local street-light contracts and sewer repairs? A reporter who has never gotten closer to Pasadena than the telecast of the Rose Bowl parade?

Outsourcing first claimed manufacturing jobs, then hit services such as technical support, airline reservations and tax preparation. Now comes the next frontier: local journalism.

James Macpherson, editor and publisher of the two-year-old Web site pasadenanow.com, acknowledged it sounds strange to have journalists in India cover news in this wealthy city just outside Los Angeles.

But he said it can be done from afar now that weekly Pasadena City Council meetings can be watched over the Internet. And he said the idea makes business sense because of India's lower labor costs.

"I think it could be a significant way to increase the quality of journalism on the local level without the expense that is a major problem for local publications," said the 51-year-old Pasadena native. "Whether you're at a desk in Pasadena or a desk in Mumbai, you're still just a phone call or e-mail away from the interview."

The first articles, some of which will carry bylines, are slated to appear Friday.

The plan has its doubters.

"Nobody in their right mind would trust the reporting of people who not only don't know the institutions but aren't even there to witness the events and nuances," said Bryce Nelson, a University of Southern California journalism professor and Pasadena resident. "This is a truly sad picture of what American journalism could become."

It is a shaky business proposition as well, said Uday Karmarkar, a UCLA professor of technology and strategy who outsources copy editing and graphics work to Indian businesses. If the goal is sophisticated reporting, he said, Macpherson could end up spending more time editing than the labor savings are worth.

This is not the first time media jobs have been shipped to India.

The British news agency Reuters runs an operation in the technology capital of Bangalore that churns out Wall Street stories based on news releases.

Macpherson appears to be the first to outsource community journalism - work that by definition has been done by reporters who walk the streets they cover.

Macphersons said his Web site, which he runs out of his house, gets about 45,000 unique readers per month but is not yet profitable. Up until now, his main help has consisted of his wife and an intern.

Macpherson posted the help-wanted ad Monday on the Indian edition of craigslist.org. Within days, he said, he had hired two Indian reporters, one a graduate of the journalism school at the University of California at Berkeley.

He wants them to broaden pasadenanow.com’s content from news releases and event listings to analyses of issues before the council, and perhaps eventually to investigative reports.

Projected annual cost: $20,800 for the pair. Not bad wages for an Indian journalist and cheap by U.S. standards, especially if each one produces the expected 15 weekly articles.

Pasadena city spokeswoman Ann Erdman said coverage from afar shouldn’t pose problems if the articles are well-edited. In any case, she said, "Local government is certainly not in the practice of dictating to local business who they can hire and where those employees should live."

Ubuntu Plans Mobile Linux Version

Ubuntu Linux developers plan to extend its open-source software development to handheld Internet-enabled devices.

Developers meeting at the Ubuntu Developer Summit, which runs through the end of this week in Seville, Spain, will discuss details of the new Ubuntu Mobile and Embedded project, announced on Saturday.

Ubuntu programmers will develop a mobile version of their Debian-based Linux operating system in collaboration with Intel Corp., which plans a new low-power processor and chipset architecture designed to allow full Internet capability on mobile devices, according to a statement published on the Ubuntu Web site.

The move to offer a mobile and embedded version comes on the heels of a similar project that Intel is supporting: the Gnome Mobile & Embedded Initiative (GMAE), announced April 19 at the Embedded Linux Conference in Santa Clara, California. The initiative is open to developers,

manufacturers and others interested in developing mobile device applications based on Gnome-based open-source components.

The summit is being organized by Canonical Ltd., the commercial sponsor of Ubuntu. South African entrepreneur Mark Shuttleworth initiated the project to create Ubuntu, based on Debian GNU/Linux, and founded Canonical in 2004. Canonical offers usage and basic support of the operating system for free, and additional services on commercial terms.

Overall, Ubuntu Linux appears to be gaining traction among users. Last week, Dell Inc. announced plans to preload Ubuntu Linux on its upcoming Linux desktop PCs and laptops. The company said the decision came in response to a customer feedback program that registered high interest in Ubuntu Linux.

Canonical will provide Dell with support services.

The free, open-source operating system runs on notebook and desktop computers as well as thin clients and servers.

Challenges facing developers of the mobile edition include the design of innovative graphic interfaces and power management capabilities, according to the posting on the Ubuntu Web site.

The mobile edition is slated for release in October, together with the new Ubuntu 7.10 version.

Although the use of Linux in smartphones is still comparatively low, accounting for only around 6 percent of the market for smartphone operating systems in 2006, demand for open source will increase as more handset makers move away from older proprietary phone operating systems, Nick Spencer, an analyst with Canalys.com Ltd., said in an earlier interview. Spencer expects demand to be strong in Asia, particularly in China.

DRAM Prices Drop

Users looking to add more DRAM (dynamic RAM) to their PCs are likely to continue to see bargains throughout May and June, as prices of the memory chips continue to crash.

The contract price of the most widely used DRAM chips, 512M bit, 667MHz DDR2 (double data rate, second generation), slid below US$2 for the first time in the first half of May. The chips dropped 8.8 percent from mid-April to $1.94 per chip, according to DRAMeXchange Technology Inc., a Taiwanese company that runs an online DRAM market.

It’s great news for users. Falling DRAM rates can help offset recent increases in prices for LCD (liquid crystal display) panels, and keep PC prices in check. Users wanting to boost their system speed can also add more DRAM at a low cost. These prices aren’t likely to last longer than the next few months. At $1.94 each, the chips are well below the $2.50-$3.00 cost of production for chip makers, and they’ll likely shift their production strategies in order to reverse the decline. The second half of the year is also the strongest for PC sales, another factor that could stop the current downtrend.

DRAMeXchange said the DRAM market appears to be weaker than expected in May and June, and many companies in the supply chain, including module makers and PC vendors, have already built up inventories. Prices won't rebound until these inventories are worked down.

The fall below $2 was also significant because of its relative ease, noted Gartner Inc. There was less resistance at that psychologically important level than expected, the industry researcher said.

Even though chip makers are producing DRAM at a loss, prices may not rebound quickly. The companies have to continue selling the chips to bring in cash so they can pay for their expensive DRAM factories. They could try shifting some production to other products, such as NAND flash memory and image sensors, where prices are firmer, but it takes months to tweak production lines for such a change. They could miss an uptick in the DRAM market.

Around three-fourths of all DRAM chips are bought and sold by contracts between DRAM makers and major PC vendors such as Dell Inc. Prices are renegotiated twice per month. The remaining one-fourth is sold on open spot markets, like commodities such as oil and gold.

Contract prices of the chips have fallen 67 percent since the start of the year, when they were fetching $5.95 each. Although many analysts watch DRAM prices as an indication PC shipments might be slowing down, that's not likely the case this time. DRAMeXchange says the decline was caused by chip makers switching some production lines to DRAM from NAND flash memory, which had seen prices fall for nearly six months before recently stabilizing. The changeover has caused an oversupply in DRAM, while the glut in NAND flash memory has eased. There does not appear to be any problem with the PC market, analysts said.

Paris Hilton Logs On for Forgiveness

Paris Hilton has used her MySpace site to post a blog urging visitors to sign an online petition that asks authorities for leniency regarding her drink driving conviction.

The petition, which was set up by a Hilton supporter, calls on California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to terminate her jail sentence.

Hilton was charged in Los Angeles with driving under the influence and sentenced to 45 days in Century Regional Detention Facility in California beginning on 5 June.

The petition claims Hilton provides "beauty and excitement to our otherwise mundane lives."

"We do not support drunk driving or DUI charges. Paris should have been sober. But she shouldn't go to jail, either," the petition continues.

Those who have signed the petition also claim that the sentence is unfair and was given to put the dangers of drink driving into the public eye. The petition has received almost 12,000 signatures so far.

In addition to the petition, Hilton's lawyers said that they will appeal the decision. The online petition is yet to be reviewed by the governor's

office.

Tattlers Unite! Citizen Sites Share the Shame

Ever drive on the freeway and cut somebody off? Miss the trash can and not bother to pick your stuff up? Park in a handicap space while in a crazy-mad rush?

Beware, scofflaws of all types. Big Brother may not be watching, but your fellow citizens are, and thanks to a flurry of tattletale websites, your violations can be held up for the world to see.

Call it Public Humiliation 2.0.

These websites let users complain about bad drivers and even post their license plates (Platewire.com) and photos (Irate-Driver.com). There's a website for people caught littering (Litterbutt.com) or seen illegally parked in a handicap spot (Caughtya.org). Some sites even allow people to report negligent nannies (Isawyournanny.blogspot.com) or just plain rude people (Rudepeople.com).

"I want to educate people about litter and make them think before they throw something out," says Chris Woolson, who has cyber-fingered 38,502 culprits since 2003.

Adds Mark Buckman, the man behind Platewire.com: "My ultimate goal is to develop a user-based application that can positively affect drivers' behavior."

Though privacy advocates and civil libertarians have expressed concern about privacy rights, Buckman says he's not overly concerned. "I've removed a total of three plates from my site, from people who contacted me and said this is completely untrue. But for the most part, I get contacted by people who find their plate on the site and they say it didn't quite happen this way, or it was a bad day, or wanting to find out who did it. In those cases, I just let them argue on the website."

A look at three tattletale sites:

Platewire.com

Target: Bad drivers

The scoop: Mark Buckman, 32, a software developer, launched the site last year after a scary 17-mile commute from his home in Fairfax, Va., to his job in Arlington. The trip included "a guy driving with his knee while searching for something in the back seat of his car, and an elderly gentleman who went all the way from the far left lane to the far right lane to make a right turn."

The site's 65,000 registered users post license plates in several categories. Buckman says he spends about 20 hours a week maintaining the site and covers his costs through a Web ad network that brings in $1,500 to $2,000 a month.

Caughtya.org

Target: People who illegally park in handicap spots

The scoop: Caughtya.org went live 14 months ago and averages 1,500 unique visitors a day. The site has nearly 400 photos of illegally parked cars in six countries. Fred Sinclair, who operates the site, pays for it himself but accepts donations. Sinclair, who has a hearing disability, launched the site because it's a problem few acknowledge. "We had been told by many business owners that disability-parking abuse didn't really exist at their location. We wanted to show these people that it does happen."

Litterbutt.com

Target: Litterbugs

The scoop: Chris Woolson launched the site four years ago. The site has no public postings, but license plate numbers of offenders are forwarded to government officials. "Senseless littering has always been a pet peeve of mine," says Woolson, 37, a Web developer from Philadelphia. His site also lets people buy Litterbutt bumper stickers as well as "You're a Litterbutt" cards to place on offenders' cars. Litterbutt.com also maintains a database of state litter laws and compiles stats on offenders.

READERS: Share other citizen-friendly websites in the comments section. What sites would you like to see that haven't been created already?

MySpace To Host Online "Town Hall" US Presidential Forums

MySpace announced on Thursday that it will host online "town hall" forums at which US presidential candidates will field questions from people watching on the Internet.

MySpace Presidential Town Hall meetings will be held on US college campuses from September through December and broadcast live on the popular social networking website so viewers can instantly message questions.

"This won't be the stale debate format with one moderator getting canned answers to the same old questions," said MySpace chief executive Chris DeWolfe.

"Our users will have the chance to get direct answers to the questions they want to ask, unfiltered."

The roster of candidates taking part in forums includes Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, Rudy Giuliani, John McCain', Barack Obama', Mitt Romney, and Tommy Thompson.

"MySpace is remaking the mold for political interaction online," said MySpace president Tom Anderson.

The announcement comes as MySpace, which is owned by News Corporation in New York City, works to establish itself as a new-age platform for democracy.

MySpace and Mark Burnett plan to ask the US Internet community to pick

"the nation's next great politician" from contenders featured in a television program dubbed "Independent."

Candidates will be culled from those that nominate themselves in videos uploaded to MySpace.

"Independent" candidates will promote their views and cultivate support on MySpace profile pages. Television and Internet viewers will get to vote online or by telephone. One candidate will be eliminated from "Independent" each week.

The television program is tentatively slated to be air from January to May of 2008.

US presidential candidates already have profile pages on MySpace's politically-themed Impact Channel.

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